

WOMEN AS MOTHERS IN PRE-INDUSTRIAL ENGLAND

Essays in memory of Dorothy McLaren

Edited by
Valerie Fildes

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Volume 17

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1990

This edition first published in 2013

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-53409-3 (Set)

eISBN: 978-0-203-10425-5 (Set)

ISBN: 978-0-415-63337-6 (Volume 17)

eISBN: 978-0-203-09508-9 (Volume 17)

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Contributors

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Valerie Fildes trained and worked as a nurse before obtaining a first degree and Ph.D. in Human Biology at the University of Surrey. She has carried out research on infant care and paediatrics prior to 1800 at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine and is the author of *Breasts, Bottles and Babies: A History of Infant Feeding* (Edinburgh, 1986) and *Wet Nursing. A History from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford, 1988). She is currently researching infant feeding practices in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries at the ESRC Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure.

Fiona Newall studied Geography at Clare College, Cambridge, and carried out the research for her Ph.D. at the ESRC Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. She is currently a research fellow at the Social Policy Research Unit, University of York.

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1500–1900 (Cambridge, 1983), *A Lasting Relationship. Parents and Children Over Three Centuries*, (London, 1987), and the forthcoming *The Meditations and Medical Practices of Lady Grace Mildmay* (1989). She has completed the research for a two-volume work on family relationships among the propertied ranks of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century society, and is currently teaching history at Tulane University, New Orleans.

Mary Prior was born in China, educated in New Zealand, and came to England in 1959. After the death of her husband she became a mature student and was awarded a D.Phil. from the University of Oxford. She has worked part-time for the Open University and the Oxford University Department of External Studies. She is the author of *Fisher Row: Oxford Fishermen, Bargemen and Canal Boatmen 1500–1900* (Oxford, 1982) and editor of *Women in English Society 1500–1800* (London, 1985).

Robert Schnucker obtained degrees from Northeast Missouri State University, Dubuque Theological Seminary, and the University of Iowa. He teaches at Northeast Missouri State University and is currently director of the Thomas Jefferson University Press and edits several scholarly journals. He is the author of numerous articles and works on social history and history of education.

Adrian Wilson studied preclinical medicine at the University of Adelaide, where he was awarded a research degree in medical science, and researched the history of childbirth for a history D.Phil. at the University of Sussex. His forthcoming book *A Safe Deliverance* embodies this research and also some years of post-doctoral study and teaching in the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, Cambridge. He has worked on the history of gender, medicine, and science in early-modern England and, with T. G. Ashplant, on historical epistemology. He is currently a research fellow in the Department of Social History, University of Leicester.

Abbreviations

Add.	Additional
<i>Am. Hist. Rev.</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
<i>Am. J. Dis. Child.</i>	<i>American Journal for the Diseases of Children</i>
<i>Ann. Démog. Hist.</i>	<i>Annales de Démographie Historique</i>
<i>Annales ESC</i>	<i>Annales d'Economies, Sociétés et Civilisations</i>
<i>Archaeol. Cant.</i>	<i>Archaeologia Cantiana</i>
<i>Bapt. Quart.</i>	<i>Baptist Quarterly</i>
<i>Berks Old & New</i>	<i>Berkshire Old and New</i>
BI	Borthwick Institute
BL	British Library
BodL	Bodleian Library
<i>Bull. Hist. Med.</i>	<i>Bulletin of the History of Medicine</i>
<i>Bull. Soc. Soc. Hist. Med.</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Society for the Social History of Medicine</i>
CCCC	Corpus Christi College, Cambridge
CCRO	Chester City Record Office
<i>Child & Fam.</i>	<i>Child and Family</i>
<i>Compar. Civil. Rev.</i>	<i>Comparative Civilisations Review</i>
<i>Compar. Stud. Soc. Hist.</i>	<i>Comparative Studies in Society and History</i>
<i>Cont. & Change</i>	<i>Continuity and Change</i>
<i>Crim. Just. Hist.</i>	<i>Criminal Justice History</i>
CUL	Cambridge University Library
DNB	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
DRO	Devon Record Office
<i>Dugdale Soc. Occ. Pap.</i>	<i>Dugdale Society Occasional Papers</i>

Abbreviations

DWL	Dr Williams Library
<i>Econ. Hist. Rev.</i>	<i>Economic History Review</i>
<i>Eighteenth Cent. Stud.</i>	<i>Eighteenth Century Studies</i>
ERO	Essex Record Office
<i>Fem. Stud.</i>	<i>Feminist Studies</i>
GL	Guildhall Library
<i>Glasg. Med. J.</i>	<i>Glasgow Medical Journal</i>
GLRO	Greater London Record Office
<i>Herts Count.</i>	<i>Hertfordshire Countryside</i>
<i>Hist. & Theory</i>	<i>History and Theory</i>
<i>Hist. Childh. Quart.</i>	<i>History of Childhood Quarterly</i>
<i>Hist. Educ.</i>	<i>History of Education</i>
<i>Hist. J.</i>	<i>Historical Journal</i>
<i>Hist. Meth.</i>	<i>Historical Methods</i>
<i>Hist. Nurs. Grp Roy. Coll.</i>	<i>History of Nursing Group, Royal</i>
<i>Nurs. Bull.</i>	<i>College of Nursing Bulletin</i>
<i>Hist. Today</i>	<i>History Today</i>
<i>Hist. Workshop J.</i>	<i>History Workshop Journal</i>
HL	Huntington Library
HRO	Hertfordshire Record Office
<i>Hum. Biol.</i>	<i>Human Biology</i>
<i>Int. J. Wom. Stud.</i>	<i>International Journal of Women's</i>
	<i>Studies</i>
<i>J. Biosoc. Sci.</i>	<i>Journal of Biosocial Science</i>
<i>J. Fam. Hist.</i>	<i>Journal of Family History</i>
<i>J. Hist. Ideas</i>	<i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i>
<i>J. Hist. Med</i>	<i>Journal of the History of Medicine</i>
	<i>and Allied Sciences</i>
<i>J. Interdisc. Hist.</i>	<i>Journal of Interdisciplinary History</i>
<i>J. Med. Ren. Stud.</i>	<i>Journal of Medieval and Renaissance</i>
	<i>Studies</i>
<i>J. Psychohist.</i>	<i>Journal of Psychohistory</i>
<i>J. Relig. Hist.</i>	<i>Journal of Religious History</i>
JRL	John Rylands Library
<i>J. Roy. Soc. Med.</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal Society of</i>
	<i>Medicine</i>
<i>J. Sex Res.</i>	<i>Journal of Sex Research</i>
<i>J. Soc. Arch.</i>	<i>Journal of the Society of Archivists</i>
<i>J. Soc. Hist.</i>	<i>Journal of Social History</i>
KAO	Kent Archive Office
<i>Kroeber Anthropol. Soc. Pap.</i>	<i>Kroeber Anthropological Society</i>
	<i>Papers</i>

Abbreviations

LAO	Lincolnshire Archive Office
<i>Law Hist. Rev.</i>	<i>Law and History Review</i>
LJRO	Lichfield Joint Record Office
<i>Loc. Popul. Stud.</i>	<i>Local Population Studies</i>
<i>Lond. Rev. Books</i>	<i>London Review of Books</i>
LPL	Lambeth Palace Library
LSG	Library of the Society of Genealogists
<i>Mat. Child. Hlth</i>	<i>Maternal and Child Health</i>
<i>Med. Hist.</i>	<i>Medical History</i>
<i>Mid. Chron.</i>	<i>Midwives' Chronicle</i>
<i>Mid. Hist.</i>	<i>Midland History</i>
<i>Mid. Hlth Vis. Comm. Nurs.</i>	<i>Midwife, Health Visitor and Community Nurse</i>
MUL	Manchester University Library
NLS	National Library of Scotland
<i>North. Hist.</i>	<i>Northern History</i>
<i>Nott. Med. Stud</i>	<i>Nottingham Medieval Studies</i>
NRO	Northampton Record Office
NUL	Nottingham University Library
<i>Nurs. Times</i>	<i>Nursing Times</i>
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
ORO	Oxford Record Office
<i>P & P</i>	<i>Past and Present</i>
<i>Path. Ann.</i>	<i>Pathology Annual</i>
<i>Phil. Pub. Aff.</i>	<i>Philosophy and Public Affairs</i>
<i>Popul. Dev. Rev.</i>	<i>Population and Development Review</i>
<i>Popul. Stud.</i>	<i>Population Studies</i>
PRO	Public Record Office
<i>Scient. Am.</i>	<i>Scientific American</i>
SCL	Sheffield Central Library
<i>Scot. Hist. Soc. Miscel.</i>	<i>Scottish History Society Miscellany</i>
ScotRO	Scottish Record Office
<i>Sixteenth Cent. J.</i>	<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>
<i>Soc. Hist.</i>	<i>Social History</i>
<i>Soc. Rev.</i>	<i>Sociological Review</i>
SomRO	Somerset Record Office
StaRO	Stafford Record Office
<i>Stud. Church Hist.</i>	<i>Studies in Church History</i>
<i>Stud. Eighteenth-Cent. Cult.</i>	<i>Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture</i>
<i>Trans Camb. Bibliog. Soc.</i>	<i>Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society</i>

Abbreviations

<i>Trans Hist. Soc. Lancs Chesh.</i>	<i>Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire</i>
<i>Trans Roy. Hist. Soc.</i>	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
<i>Univ. Pittsburgh Law Rev.</i>	<i>University of Pittsburgh Law Review</i>
WCA	Westminster City Archives
WIL	Wellcome Institute Library
Wilts Rec. Soc.	Wiltshire Record Society
WRO	Warwick Record Office

Dorothy McLaren

Dorothy McLaren left school at the age of 15 and it was not until her children were grown up that she entered academic life. After gaining a degree in history from the University of Reading she embarked on a study of 'Stuart Caversham: a Thames-side community in Oxfordshire during the seventeenth century', for which she was awarded a Ph.D. in 1975. It was during her research for this thesis that she first noted the differences in childbearing and lactation habits between wealthy and poor women in the community. Her interest in the reasons for these differences was to lead to her spending the last 10 years of her life in detailed research into the lives of women in seventeenth-century England, at first in Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire and later in Somerset. By reconstituting small communities and using both historical and modern physiological evidence to explain her findings, she identified and explained the connection between breastfeeding, marital fertility, and child spacing in pre-industrial England.

That lactating women are less likely to conceive had been known for centuries. Both physicians and ordinary men and women were well aware of the connection between breastfeeding and fertility. During the twentieth century, however, this concept had received the attention of doctors and physiologists who demanded concrete proof. Thus, scientific opinion on the existence of this link fluctuated according to the current state of research. It is only in the last few years that the contraceptive effect of breastfeeding has been fully accepted. Just 6 years ago it was possible for an eminent medical scientist, when asked his opinion of the latest published evidence on lactation and fertility, to state that he did not believe it because

he had worked on it 20 years before and had found no evidence that breastfeeding suppressed fertility at that time. Not surprisingly, historians and historical demographers followed the views of the scientific community when trying to explain historical changes in fertility. Thus, when Dorothy first produced her interpretation of the effect of maternal breastfeeding and wet nursing on fertility and birth intervals, reactions from historians tended to be hostile, ranging from polite interest, through disbelief, to, in at least one instance, open attack after presenting a paper on the subject. However, time was to vindicate her theory. Growing scientific and demographic evidence resulted in the acceptance of the concept that natural, frequent breastfeeding does have a contraceptive effect, particularly in the first few months after birth. Dorothy's last published work, 'Marital fertility and lactation 1570–1720', not only provided impressive historical evidence of the important role of lactation in the lives of women in pre-industrial England, but also listed the developing beliefs of both scientists and historical demographers about the significance of lactation amenorrhoea. Today her pioneering work on the subject is fully accepted.

Shortly before her death in a car accident in 1985, Dorothy pinpointed another gap in the historiography of women in seventeenth-century England: their central and important role as mothers. She did not live to write the book she planned on English women as mothers in this period. It seemed fitting, therefore, that a volume in her memory should concentrate upon the subject area she had identified, and largely utilize the type of evidence she sought and employed to such good effect: the detailed personal and local records of English women and their families.

This book is dedicated with affection and respect to Dorothy McLaren, 1922–85.

Publications of Dorothy McLaren

'The marriage act of 1653: its influence on the parish registers', *Popul. Stud.* 28 (1974), 319–27.

'Fertility, infant mortality and breast-feeding in the seventeenth century, *Bull. Soc. Soc. Hist. Med.*, 20 (1977), 12–15.

Dorothy McLaren

'Fertility, infant mortality and breastfeeding in the seventeenth century', *Med. Hist.*, 22 (1978) 378–96.

'Nature's contraceptive. Wet nursing and prolonged lactation: the case of Chesham, Buckinghamshire 1578–1601', *Med. Hist.*, 23 (1979), 426–41.

'The individualism of good mothering', *Bull. Soc. Soc. Hist. Med.*, 24 (1979) 36–8.

'Emmenologia: a curse or a blessing?', *Bull. Soc. Soc. Hist. Med.*, 25 (1979), 65–7.

'Disease and dirty water in West Somerset in the late nineteenth century', *Bull. Soc. Soc. Hist. Med.*, 35 (1984), 35–6.

'Marital fertility and lactation 1570–1720', in M. Prior (ed.), *Women in English Society 1500–1800* (London, 1985), 22–53.

Introduction

Although an increasing amount of work is being published on the lives of English women in the pre-industrial period, research on their role as mothers remains at an early stage. Yet, as the essays in this volume will show, the preparation for, and the experience and the results of, motherhood were central to the existence of women in all classes of society.

Patricia Crawford's chapter introduces the concept of maternity in the seventeenth century and outlines the expectations and experience of being a mother. Despite the patriarchal influences which shaped society's ideas about maternity, the role presented both problems and delights and, for many women, was the most fundamental and rewarding experience of their lives. She sets the scene for the chapters of Linda Pollock and Adrian Wilson, which detail the experience of pregnancy and the ritual of childbirth respectively. Pregnancy could be a time of happy expectation, but also of dread of the forthcoming confinement. It could progress uneventfully but potential hazards, such as miscarriage, had to be watched and prepared for. To varying extents, women had to adapt their way of life to the biological demands of impending motherhood. Childbirth itself was central to women's lives. Truly a rite of passage, it was a time for women alone. Although apparently shaped by patriarchal ideology, childbirth was an occasion for women to come together to form a support system, both for the labouring woman and for the continuity of female culture and social existence.

Once a woman became a mother her role had only just begun. For many, child rearing occupied most, or all, of the remaining years of their lives. How to discipline children was a

Introduction

recurring problem, especially in Puritan families, and Robert Schnucker's chapter shows that attitudes towards childhood discipline were relatively constant over time, and that discipline was primarily regarded as the prerogative of the father.

In a period when it was relatively common for children to lose one or both parents before reaching maturity, mothering by surrogates, such as wet nurses, parish nurses, and other caretakers, was an important feature of English society. Fiona Newall reconstructs some of the families in a rural parish to examine the socio-economic status of families who cared for other people's children, or whose own children were cared for by others. She demonstrates that women who mothered parish children were of lower status than women whom parents employed to care for their offspring; but she also shows that the view, based largely on French evidence, that foster mothering resulted in a high mortality of infants does not appear to be true for England. Valerie Fildes's chapter carries forward this theme by examining the children who were abandoned in London and Westminster and were cared for by foster mothers employed by parishes and institutions. Although frequently maligned, the evidence that a large proportion of nurses murdered or mistreated their infant charges is tenuous. Looking at abandonment from the woman's point of view, this chapter shows that mothers who were forced to resort to this act were not necessarily 'unnatural' or devoid of maternal feelings or love for their children.

Mary Prior's chapter uses the previously unexplored source of poems of conjugal love to show changes in women's view of marriage and family. She echoes a recurring theme in this volume, that patriarchal values shaped attitudes to marriage and motherhood. Yet women did not submit passively to male ideas of maternity. Being a mother was, and is, a continual process; ever changing and constantly developing; subject to influences from both family members and society. Each pregnancy, each birth, and each child was different, and needed to be handled as such within the accepted norms of society, regardless of the status of the women.

It is hoped that these essays will serve only as an introduction to how women faced and experienced their unique and central role as mothers in pre-industrial England. Much more remains to be discovered.

Valerie Fildes

1

The construction and experience of maternity in seventeenth-century England

Patricia Crawford

I

The continuance of human society has always depended upon woman's ability to give birth: an obvious point, but one frequently overlooked. Without woman's reproductive labour, society would cease to exist. Since reproduction is essential, all societies have an interest in controlling it. In no society known to us are women allowed to give birth however and whenever they choose. Because of women's potential maternal function, society has an interest in attempting to regulate female lives: that is, a woman's social existence is influenced by her maternal potential, irrespective of whether or not she actually gives birth. Motherhood is more than a social construct, however: it is part of woman's unique biological functioning.¹

Despite the importance of motherhood for women and for human society, it attracted comparatively little interest from historians until recently. There could be many reasons for this, not least of which may be a separation between the 'private' world of women and children and the 'public' world of men. Historians saw the lives of women and children as of little historical importance or interest, and assumed that they changed relatively little over time. Of course there was always some interest in domestic life of the past, but more from amateur historians and the reading public. However, the development of social history in the twentieth century has brought the mass of the population more into view. Social historians writing of the family and childhood have focused attention upon women's roles as wives and mothers in the past. This scrutiny was not initially particularly favourable to mothers.

Ariès developed a thesis about the discovery of childhood in the early-modern period which has exercised a powerful influence on much subsequent writing. Childhood, he argued, was recognized as a separate life stage only in the early-modern period.² Lawrence Stone has condemned mothers along with fathers as unloving parents. 'Children were brutally treated, even killed', he wrote, and documented a horrendous picture of parental neglect in the early-modern period.³ Only in the eighteenth century, argues Randolph Trumbach, were aristocratic women more interested in being mothers than wives.⁴ The most recent studies of the early-modern family are more positive. Ralph Houlbrooke and Keith Wrightson present a happier picture of families in early-modern times, but they do not distinguish between mothers and fathers as parents.⁵ Another issue recently debated is the maternal instinct: was it inherent in all women or the product of a particular historical period? 'Good mothering', according to Edward Shorter, 'is an invention of modernization.' He argued that in traditional societies mothers viewed the development and happiness of infants younger than 2 with indifference.⁶ Elizabeth Badinter also concluded that the 'maternal instinct' was not a natural one, but rather a later development.⁷ However, other scholars, such as Betty Travitsky and Brigitte Niestroj, date the focus on good mothering earlier, to the Renaissance period.⁸

Of more consequence than the development of social history for the history of motherhood has been the international women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which has raised questions about women's roles in society, the boundaries between the private and the public sphere, and about the low valuation placed on many aspects of women's lives. Feminists have drawn attention to the central importance of motherhood in their own societies, and have subjected it to various kinds of sociological and personal analysis.⁹ The ideology of motherhood has been discussed in terms of capitalist oppression, which makes women seem the natural rearers as well as bearers of children.

The women's movement has affected the writing of history. Writers of women's history initially concentrated on recovering information about the lives of women in the past and making them visible. This celebratory phase of women's history was widely criticized. Lawrence Stone, in a 1985 review, pronounced Ten Commandments for women's history, the first of which was

'Thou shalt not write about women except in relation to men and children.'¹⁰ This, he implied, was more honoured in the breach than in the observance. In his terms, writing about motherhood instead of parenthood appears to be the narrowest kind of women's history which leaves women in a vacuum. Furthermore, tracing the history of maternity could seem to be like maternity itself, something which only women do. Of fascinating interest to women, it would be of only limited interest to men. However, Stone's position caricatures the objectives and practices of women's history, and denies the essential claim of feminist history that women have had a separate historical experience. Just as men have a history as fathers, distinct from the history of parents, so maternity has a history separate from the history of the family.¹¹

Over the last 20 years, women's history has developed, both in method and in scope. To focus upon women is a political redirection: woman ceases to be the object of male study, and becomes a subject.¹² This questions the primacy of men's experiences. The history of maternity, which comprises both childbirth and female-specific child rearing, rightly focuses primarily on women, and secondarily on men's observations and directives.¹³ Whether a woman mothers within or outside a family, her experiences are affected by her society. A history of maternity directs attention to the significant aspects of society which influence the circumstances in which women conceive, give birth, and rear their children. Such an analysis raises questions about the relationship between gender and power: to what extent was an ideology of motherhood part of the means by which men attempted to keep women subordinate? 'Women's history', the process of making women the subjects of their own story, thus challenges existing accounts of motherhood written from the perspective of men. It invites us to re-examine the past and the histories which are made of it, as part of the longer-term goal of rewriting our histories and putting the 'private' experience of motherhood into the 'public' arena. However, the history of motherhood is not just about men's attempts to control women, for motherhood is also a unique female experience. It is the purpose of this chapter to show, first, how maternity was socially constructed in seventeenth-century English society and, second, how women themselves experienced maternity.

II

The biological experiences of maternity – parturition and lactation – were socially constructed in early-modern England, and child rearing was defined as likewise natural to women. The ways in which men developed an ideology of the good woman in seventeenth-century England are reasonably familiar, but some brief discussion is necessary here. Men had a great deal to say about motherhood, and their medical treatises, sermons, domestic advice books, and handbooks for justices are the major sources to be used for an account of the ideology of maternity.¹⁴ While the focus of their attention was on motherhood, the underlying issue was female sexuality. Divines and medical practitioners all shared the same assumptions: women were the disorderly sex, and their sexuality was to be controlled so that they bore children only within marriage, and then only to their lawful husbands.¹⁵

Medical theories were increasingly published in English during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, so that people could understand the biological processes related to reproduction, or ‘generation’, as it was termed.¹⁶ Treatises originally published in Latin thus became more generally accessible. Popular medical texts were reprinted, even into the twentieth century in the case of one work, *Aristotles Masterpiece*.¹⁷ Most people derived their understanding of reproduction from a mixture of medical theories, and, during the seventeenth century, the gap between the theories of the educated élite and those of the general populace widened. An outline of the main theories shows how medical ‘knowledge’ gave a social meaning to the biological process, and distinguishes social implications of certain of these theories.

The onset of menstruation showed a woman to be fertile and was thought to be necessary for conception. After the menarche, she developed seed in her blood and longed for sex because she wanted to be a mother. Frustrated of her desire, she might sicken and turn green. Men were convinced that women were biologically driven to sexual intercourse: women ‘snatch the seed from them’, said Lemnius in the sixteenth century, ‘as hungry dogs do at a bone’.¹⁸ They wanted to be mothers: ‘Sterility or Barrenness hath in all Ages and Countries been esteemed a Reproach’.¹⁹